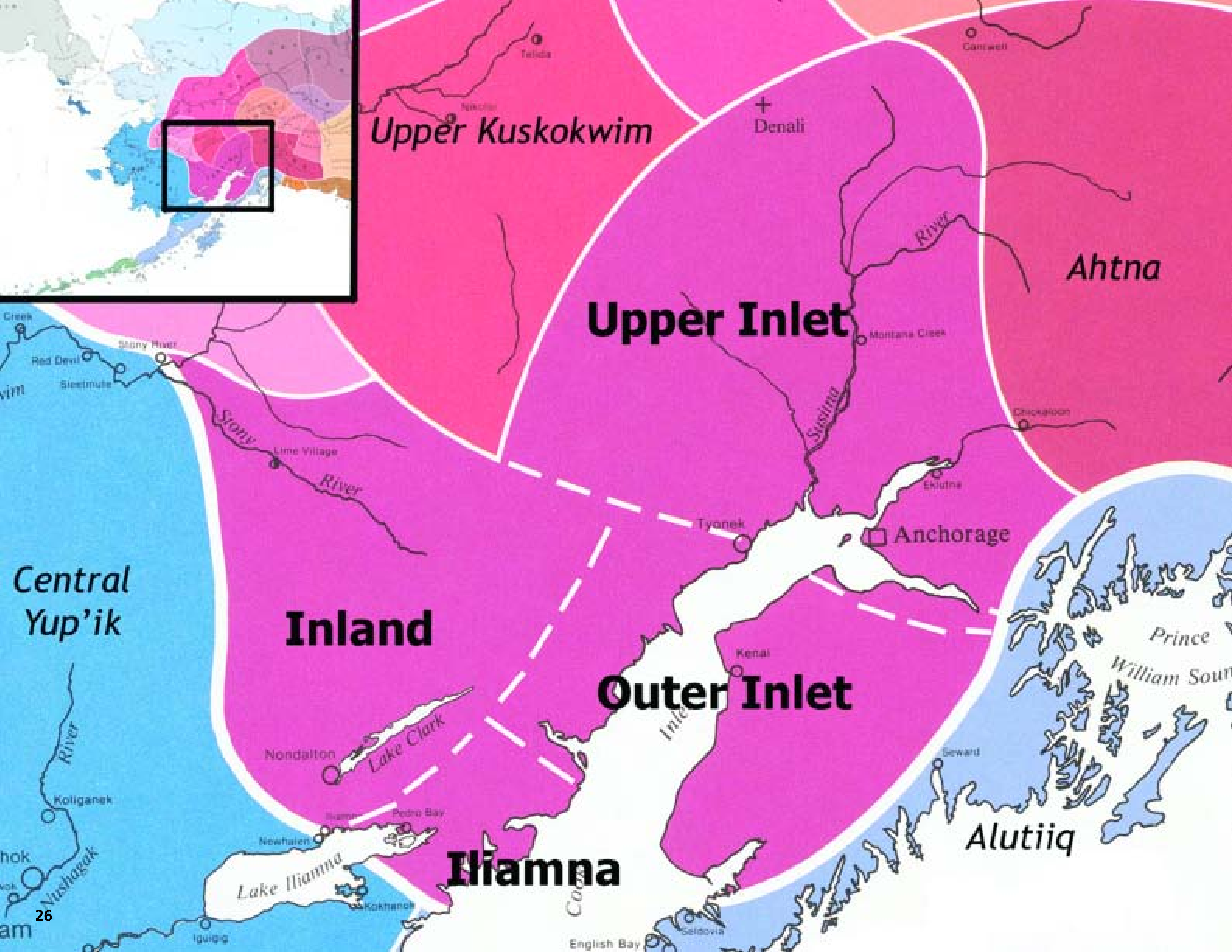
Upper Kuskokwim
Denali
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Iliamna
Central Yup'ik
Alutiiq
Anchorage
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Stony River
Susitna
Lake Clark
Lake Iliamna
Nushagak
Telida
Nikolai
Cantwell
Montana Creek
Stony River
Red Devil
Sleetmute
Lime Village
Tyonek
Eklutna
Chickaloon
Kenai
Seward
Nondalton
Pedro Bay
Newhalen
Koliganek
Kokhanok
Igiugig
English Bay
Seldovia

Speaking Across Generations: Dena'ina Language Revitalization in Southcentral Alaska

"Languages are more than just practical systems of communication. Each is also a creation of beauty, through the collective and creative spirit of countless generations of our ancestors, with spiritual and emotional values unique to the identity of each society" (Krauss 1995).

Photograph courtesy of Alan Boraas

People gather on the Kenai beach at the Dena'ina Festival in June 2004 to witness the pulling in of the set-net. The Festival was part of a three-week Dena'ina Language Institute.

Left: Language map showing four Dena'ina language dialect areas (developed by Michael Krauss 1992).

By Karen K. Gaul and Gary Holton

Pulling in a set-net generally takes only a few people. But on the Kenai beach in June 2004, a group of several dozen Dena'ina Athabascans from various communities all around the Cook Inlet region gathered to witness the pulling in of the net. They were gathered together for a second annual Dena'ina Festival. The celebration included a potlatch, traditional set-net fishing, and song and dance performances. The festival, hosted by the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, was one of the high points during the Dena'ina Language Institute. The institute was supported by a U.S. Department of Education Title VII grant, and was co-sponsored by the Alaska Native Language Center, Kenai Peninsula College, and the Interior Athabaskan Tribal College. Students and teachers met every day for the first three weeks of June for an intensive period of study and future planning.

Fading Voices

Dena'ina is one of the many endangered languages of Alaska. It belongs to the Athabascan language family, which is comprised of some forty languages spread across parts of Alaska, Canada, the U.S. Pacific Northwest, California, and the U.S. Southwest *(Krauss and Golla 1981)*. Dena'ina speakers have historically lived in the areas around the region of Cook Inlet, but differences in pronunciation and vocabulary have developed into various dialects correlated with particular regions *(see map) (Kari 1975, Kari and Kari 1982)*. What is now Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, encompassing over four million acres, lies at the heart of Inland Dena'ina, one of four dialect areas. Upper Inlet Dena'ina stretches as far north as Denali, and the Outer Inlet dialect skips across the Inlet to include the west coast and the east coast, stretching across most of the Kenai Peninsula. The Dena'ina spoken in the region of Pedro Bay and Old Iliamna comprises a fourth dialect *(Kari and Kari 1982, Russell Kari 1987)*.

The fate of Dena'ina is not unique. Many of Alaska's indigenous languages are severely endangered. They have been helped along the path to oblivion for many years by both official and unofficial policy. Beginning in the 1880s, official U.S. educational policy forbade all use of Alaska Native languages in schools *(Alton 1998)*. The removal of children to residential schools furthered the process of severing transmission of Native languages from parent to child.

Today, children no longer grow up speaking Dena'ina, and there are few fully

fluent speakers of Dena'ina remaining. Some elders learned Dena'ina as a first language, but most of them were taught English in grade schools at a very young age and, in many cases, were forbidden to speak their native language.

Nearly 20 years ago, anthropologist Linda Ellanna predicted that Dena'ina was moribund *(Ellanna 1986)*. Such a prediction is fairly ominous *(see also Krauss 1980)*. Whether Dena'ina can be revitalized into a widely and actively spoken language remains to be seen. A growing number of people in southcentral Alaska are hoping to turn the tide.

Language as a Cultural Resource

Cultural resource managers in the National Park Service work to record and preserve archeological sites, historic structures, cultural landscapes and ethnographic resources. But one of the most significant ethnographic resources for the Dena'ina and other Native groups is not a site, structure, or object, it is their language, with all of its subtle and complex meanings. Language cannot be found or recovered in the landscape, it is stored in people's memories.

Just a generation or two ago, there were no audio or written recordings of Dena'ina. Like other languages and cultural traditions for the vast majority of human experience on earth, it was orally shared. The National Park Service, among many other organizations and individuals, has played a key role in supporting a series of research projects that have focused on the gathering and recording of interviews in the Dena'ina language and on Dena'ina culture, for language and culture are inextricably tied.

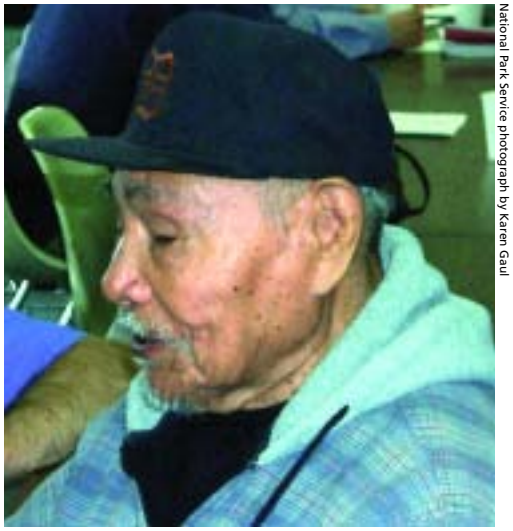
Currently, Lake Clark National Park is conducting an ethnographic overview and assessment for the western Cook Inlet region surrounding and including the park. One element of the broader project is to inventory and catalog all existing audio recordings in Dena'ina into one database. This includes recordings held in NPS archives as well as at the Alaska Native Language Center, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in individual collections, and elsewhere. These recordings represent the contributions of numerous Dena'ina such as Andrew Balluta, Albert Wassilie, Harry Balluta, Ruth Koktalash, and many others who dedicated their time and energy to the preservation of Dena'ina language and culture. So far, James Kari, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, has inventoried around 350 different recordings. This work is an important step in assessing what we have in Dena'ina, and contributes to the further use of the recordings in revitalization programs and research.

In another element of the ethnographic project, Ron Stanek and Davin Holen of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and Karen Gaul with the NPS are compiling existing data and conducting new interviews with Dena'ina residents of the Lake Clark area. In doing so, they piece together a more detailed understanding of kinship, travel patterns, subsistence practices, and overall cultural occupancy and land use in the Lake Clark region.

This project builds on others that have been done in the area. A quarter of a century ago, Linda Ellanna and Andrew Balluta conducted research in the Nondalton area for *Nuvendaltin Quht'ana, The People of Nondalton (Ellanna and Balluta, 1992)*. Supported by the National Park Service, this ethnographic research provided important accounts of social organization, land use, and belief systems. In the late

Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Ray Schaleben

Residents of Old Nondalton with school teacher Hannah Breece (far left) on July 4th, 1911. Breece was a teacher in Iliamna, and traveled to Old Nondalton to teach in the summer. In classrooms such as Breece's, English was taught and Native languages forbidden.



National Park Service photograph by Karen Gaul

Dena'ina language revitalization remains an achievable goal. Revitalization can take many forms, but in all cases it requires a strong commitment from within the community.

Left: Pete Bobby, an elder of Lime Village, is a Dena'ina speaker and assists in teaching the language to interested learners.

1990s, Project Jukebox, a joint project between the park and the UAF Rasmuson Library, compiled interviews of elders, photos, and maps into an interactive CD-ROM. Viewers can listen to elders speak on various topics, hear descriptions of photos, and be guided through trails on a map. Elders also offer Dena'ina words for various places and objects. These interviews contribute to both cultural and linguistic preservation.

The Lake Clark cultural resources management program also periodically supports the work of linguist Kari in gathering vocabulary for dictionaries and related educational materials *(Kari 1994)*. In interviews with Nickoli Kolyaha, for example, Kari was told some of the beautifully descriptive names of the Lake Clark and Old Iliamna areas such as "the fish swim up climbing" *(Diqak'ghileha)*, "Upon it we paint ourselves" *(Veq'Nuhuch'nashchigi)*, and "the one in the timbered valley" *(Taq'Nust'in) (Kolyaha 1999)*. Kari, along with James Fall, have tracked down hundreds of Dena'ina place names throughout the region, building maps, and tying the names to stories, families, and their seasonal use patterns, which has been gathered and published in *Shem Pete's Alaska (Kari and Fall 2003)*.

Research by Priscilla Russell, often in conjunction with Dr. Kari, has contributed to publications in plant lore, bird traditions, resource use, and village economy in some of the more interior inland areas *(Russell Kari 1983, 1985, 1987; Russell 2003)*. Peter Kalifornsky, a Dena'ina elder and recorder of Dena'ina culture and history, worked with Alan Boraas, Jim Kari, and Priscilla Russell to produce a collection of writings called *A Dena'ina Legacy: K'tl'egh'I Sukdu (Kalifornsky 1991)*. Kalifornsky, who lived

National Park Service photograph

Michelle Ravenmoon of Lake Iliamna and Chad Chickalusion of Tyonek, making birch bark baskets during a language lesson.

on both sides of Cook Inlet over the course of his life, writes this about education of the young: "They should be aware of the old people and retain all of their language work. They should learn without writing … Study the words, the remaining words. And all the different songs. And the place names that they made long ago. And they should compare all the living things, how living things grow" *(Kalifornsky 1991)*.

The recordings of oral narratives in Dena'ina by all of these Dena'ina elders and researchers capture the most valuable linguistic resource of all: spoken Dena'ina, with all of its idioms, rhythms, playfulness, and beauty. The tapes can be used for instructional materials in emerging Dena'ina language programs. They can become tutorials for Dena'ina language in use. In addition, the details contained in the studies of traditional use of plants, birds, fish, and other animals offer a cultural and environmental context for students of the language.

First Steps

Several years ago, Pauline Hobson of Nondalton and other members of the Dena'ina community began raising the question of whether they might more actively work on Dena'ina revitalization. They approached the Alaska Native Language Center, and their efforts to preserve their language have been multiplying ever since.

Much of the initial work of language revitalization involves bringing speakers and learners together. This may seem an obvious and perhaps redundant task, but it is not. Learning a language takes an uncommon level of commitment, as well as good supporting materials. Because the Dena'ina language area spans a large territory, which includes both urban and remote areas, connecting people across this vast and geographically diverse region is particularly challenging.

National Park Service photograph by Karen Gaul

Sondra Stuart, Mary Hobson (an elder from Nondalton) and Raina Thiele at the Dena'ina Language Institute at Kenai Peninsula College, June 2004.

In May 2003 the Kenaitze Indian Tribe hosted the first Dena'ina Festival. This event drew speakers from across all the Dena'ina dialect areas to discuss the prospects for language revitalization. More than 100 people attended. The festival was followed by a three-week Dena'ina language course held at Kenai Peninsula College and sponsored by the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Dena'ina speakers were encouraged by the presence of interested and dedicated students, many of whom had long been eager to learn, but lacked a teacher who shared their enthusiasm. Over the following year, people traveled periodically to additional workshops to teach and learn from one another, as part of a U.S. Department of Education project. The number of Dena'ina learners at the 2004 summer institute grew from ten the previous year to 40.

Elders serve as language mentors for learners, even across some distances. Gladys Evanoff, a mentor, says that the process is going well for her. "[This work] is making [the language] come back for me. I kind of forgot, since I've been away from my Grandma for so long. I can understand everything, but learning to speak is more difficult. It's helping me to come back to where I started" (personal communication).

Occasional meetings throughout the year provide crucial contact between all those involved in language revitalization efforts. Some people also have continued to hold regular meetings by audio-conference. The Alaska Native Heritage Center is offering classes in Dena'ina. Additionally, those interested in learning Dena'ina can also subscribe to a Dena'ina "word-of-the-day" email list, or Jan Gu Dena'ina Qena.

New Initiatives

Complementing all of these efforts is a project at the University of Alaska Fairbanks that will create digital access to Dena'ina materials housed at the Alaska Native Language Center. The center maintains a comprehensive collection of nearly everything written in or about the Dena'ina language. This collection includes some of the first written materials, such as William Anderson's *(1784)* Dena'ina wordlist, collected on the 1778 Cook expedition; field notes from linguists who have worked with the language over the past 50 years; and more recent curriculum materials. In addition, the collection includes more than 200 audio recordings of stories, songs, and linguistic material.

The Dena'ina Archiving, Training, and Access (DATA) project will help to make all of these materials discoverable and accessible. The result will be a searchable archive of texts and recordings which can serve as an additional resource for those wishing to learn more about Dena'ina language and culture. Annual workshops will train community members in the use of the archive so that it can continue to expand

as a dynamic resource well after the project is completed.

Additionally, in the previous year, the Alaska Native Heritage Center received a three-year grant from the Department of Education for Dena'aina Qenaga Qunuhdulzex ("the Dena'ina Language is coming back") and the Kenaitze Indian Tribe received significant funding from the Administration for Native Americans through the Department of Health and Human Services. Each of these programs will produce curricular materials for teaching Dena'ina language, and will archive existing Dena'ina materials.

Significance

In the midst of the Dena'ina Festival in June 2004, the group of Dena'ina from around Cook Inlet received word of the passing away of James "Diamond Jim" Wilson of Nondalton, an important elder who had contributed greatly to the teaching of Dena'ina language and culture. The news of his loss was particularly devastating and poignant at the festival and institute as younger generations struggled, day by day, syllable by syllable, to learn and teach Dena'ina. With the loss of each elder is the loss of all the knowledge of the language and culture he or she holds in memory.

When a language disappears, a way of viewing and thinking about the world goes with it. Poetry, puns, lullabies, and endearments are gone forever. The collective history, culture, and values of the Dena'ina people are embedded in the sounds, words, and grammatical structures of the Dena'ina language. English may function equally well as a system of communication, but it lacks the long-standing connection with the Dena'ina people.

Dena'ina language revitalization remains an achievable goal. Revitalization can take many forms, but in all cases it requires a strong commitment from within the community. And community efforts, like that among contemporary Dena'ina in south-central Alaska may just be what it takes to bring back an almost lost language. Through ongoing collaborative efforts, institutions such as the National Park Service, the Alaska Native Language Center, and others can support this effort by providing access to research, documentation, and recordings of Dena'ina language. Communities can come to see archives as their own language reservoir, holding resources that can help to build and develop language and culture in creative and dynamic ways that will be sustainable in a rapidly changing world.

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